

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 37: Voting Rights

Guests: Reyma McCoy McDeid and Sarah Funes

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

For more information: <https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/>

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey hey! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. I am a firm believer that everything is political. Existing in this world is freaking political. Today, I'm talking about political participation with two disabled activists. First, I speak with Reyma McCoy McDeid, Executive Director of the Central Iowa Center for Independent Living in Des Moines and a former candidate for state legislature. Next, I speak with Sarah Funes, a recent graduate of UC Berkeley who's very active with get out the vote efforts locally in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

Introduction to Reyma McCoy McDeid's Interview

ALICE: Reyma, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

REYMA MCCOY MCDEID: Well, thank you, Alice. I'm really honored to have a chance to chat with you this evening.

ALICE: So, Reyma, would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself, anything you'd like to share with us?

REYMA: I live in Des Moines, Iowa. And I am the Executive Director for the Center for Independent Living that's here in Des Moines. I actually ran for office [chuckles] earlier this year, for a state House seat. I did not win my primary, but I inadvertently spearheaded a conversation on the role of disabled people in the political process. Those of us with disabilities are members of the largest marginalized group in this country; however, we are notably absent from elected offices at every level in the country. We've got to get more disabled people elected to office and in positions where we are authoring policy and pushing legislation that positively impacts our lives. Because when our lives are positively impacted, everybody's lives are positively impacted.

[mellow guitar interlude]

Biggest issues facing the disability community in Central Iowa

ALICE: Can you give us a sense of some of the biggest issues facing the disability community in Central Iowa?

REYMA: A few years ago, our Medicaid system transitioned very abruptly from being managed by the state to being managed by several for-profit entities. We've over 600,000 folks in Iowa who are Medicaid members. Of that 600,000, there are 13,000 who are on long-term services and supports waivers. There's just been some very palpable impact in people's day-to-day lives because of this transition in their health care.

One of the things that I am mandated to do as Executive Director of CICIL (Central Iowa Center for Independent Living) is to advocate for folks with disabilities in central Iowa. And so, I've spent a lot of time at the state Capitol during Iowa's legislative sessions speaking about Medicaid privatization, and most recently, changes to Iowa's voting laws, including the provision that people need to now present an ID when voting at the polls. I reached a point where I really felt like I was kind of screaming into an echo chamber. And so, it is because of that, that I decided to announce my run for office in late 2017.

It was made obvious to me by my political party that I was deemed a non-viable candidate. The upside of that was that I felt that it gave me license to run a campaign where I felt like I had nothing to lose. And I really feel like it's spearheading conversations that have needed to be had for a long time.

[mellow guitar interlude]

Being seen as a non-viable candidate by the Democratic party

ALICE: Why did they see you as a non-viable candidate?

REYMA: I live in a district where the local Representative is a Republican and has been in his seat for 10 years. The district has been red for 20 years. When I was thinking about running, no other Democrat had indicated that they were interested in running. I consulted several party leaders, let them know what I was thinking about doing. And they're all very familiar with me because of the work that I do around mobilizing disabled people to vote. Although no one told me to my face that they felt that I was non-viable, that energy was certainly palpable in the interactions that I had with folks. And then also it was brought to my attention that these same party leaders were strongly encouraging the woman that had run in 2016 and lost in my district to run again because they felt that she was more viable than I was.

I am an African-American woman on the Autism spectrum [chuckles] so, and I live in the middle of Iowa. The party thought that my candidacy would sort of languish in obscurity and no one would take me seriously, and the polar opposite of that actually ended up happening. I very quickly started picking up national attention to my race and not because I'm a Black Autistic lady. It was simply that the energy around my campaign was something that outlets on a national level took notice of. Especially at the local level, the district level, the party was very openly supporting my opponent and helping her to campaign. I think that it would not be unfair for me to say that these behaviors could equate to primary meddling. [chuckles] And then ultimately, I lost my primary.

Even after the election, I was still getting media requests from throughout the country about my campaign. [chuckles] So, just this week I was featured in *Vice*. You know, I think they wish that I would just go away [chuckles], so yeah.

Future political participation

ALICE: Would you consider running again, or would you consider other avenues of political participation?

REYMA: Yeah, I would consider running again. The message that I've had about mobilizing disabled people to vote, I felt that was a message that the Democratic Party should've really glommed onto. We've got over 300,000 prospective voters in Iowa with disabilities who are eligible to vote, and only 6-10% do on a consistent basis in Iowa.

ALICE: There are still so many barriers that disabled people face, whether it's just physical accessibility, but also voter suppression tactics—

REYMA: Absolutely.

ALICE: —such as voter ID laws and other tactics by states that either limit the time, limit the number of polling places so that people have to wait in line for hours just to vote or other means.

REYMA: Right. Some great news: Iowa's Supreme Court has actually overturned several portions of the new voter ID law. In Iowa we have curbside voting. So, if a person is able to get to their polling place, they can request that the polling officials meet them literally out on the curb outside of the current polling place with a ballot. We have early voting beginning 28 days before Election Day. They can also cast their ballot from home by an absentee ballot request. A person can receive assistance in filling out their ballot at their polling place as long as it's not a person's employer or an agent of their union. So, there are these options that are available in Iowa, but however, they're not widely known.

The other important piece—and this is a real contrast to voting laws in California—is just because someone has a guardian does not mean that they are necessarily barred from voting. By and large, 90% of Iowans who have a guardian in Iowa are still eligible to vote. The options around voting and a lot of misinformation about voting I see as being barriers to people participating in the political process just as much as challenges as far as physical accessibility of going places are concerned. It's really outrageous. This is social gerrymandering, almost. You know, we're literally forcing people to not be able to participate in the political process because of really arbitrary parameters that have been set forth.

[mellow guitar interlude]

Structural changes to increase disabled people voting and running for office

ALICE: What are some structural changes in the ways elections are organized or run that you think will encourage all kinds of people to give it a shot, especially potential disabled candidates?

REYMA: There are a variety of supports for so-called average, everyday people who are wanting to run for office. You know, Emily's List offers a variety of trainings to women who wanna run for office. No such mechanisms exist for disabled people who are interested in running for office. NICL, the National Council on Independent Living, is in conversations with Emily's List and is also considering offering some kind of disabled candidate training protocol themselves. We can jump into the rabbit hole around campaign finance and how that's set up to exclude average everyday people from running for office, and that most definitely includes disabled people. We've got to overturn Citizens United in this country. And then also, disabled

people are just hyper-underrepresented at the polls on Election Day. So, we've gotta get those numbers up.

And I will disclose that up to 2014, I was basically a non-voter. So, transitioning from being a non-voter into voting on Election Day led to me getting involved on a local level in organizing and then ultimately into running for office.

ALICE: You mentioned the *Vice* article. And it's all about you and two other candidates talking about changing the rules to allow campaign funds to pay for childcare, which I think—

REYMA: Yes!

ALICE: —makes total sense. There's a lot of disabled people who would never ever remotely consider running because they think, "I don't have a lot of money. I don't have a war chest," right?

REYMA: Right, right.

ALICE: Yeah, what are some of the, I guess, hidden costs of being disabled as a candidate?

REYMA: One of the pieces of my campaign that survived my campaign is this whole issue around me filing a request in Iowa to allow Iowa state candidates to utilize campaign funds for campaign-related childcare expenses. I'm a single mom, and so I incurred a fair amount of child care expenses during my campaign that I otherwise would not have incurred. And so, I submitted that request not long after a federal-level candidate in New York had submitted her request, and it had been approved. So, right now, candidates for House of Representatives and US Senate are now able to use campaign funds for campaign-related childcare expenses. So, that's awesome. My request in Iowa was unfortunately kicked to the Iowa Legislature, and Iowa legislature is out of session until early 2019. But, and this is exciting, I've got two state Representatives that are working with me to draft a bill, and it expands on the idea of allowing candidates use campaign funds for campaign-related childcare expenses to also include caregiver expenses.

ALICE: Yeah!!!!!!

REYMA: Yeah! [laughs] My hope is that at the state level, we've got a country where disabled candidates have, again, one less rather significant barrier to running for office removed.

[mellow guitar plays through remainder of interview]

ALICE: I am just so thankful for people like you putting yourself out there. I cannot wait to see what you do next, and thank you so much for all that you do.

REYMA: We're standing at the precipice of truly creating a society that allows for you and I and my daughter and everybody else to live a truly intersectional, inclusive life with us co-creating a country that allows for us to live well.

[pensive piano music interlude]

Introduction to Sarah Funes's Interview

ALICE: Sarah, welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast. I'm delighted to have you on today. And why don't you just tell me a little bit about yourself.

SARAH FUNES: My name is Sarah Funes. I am 27 years old. I just graduated from the University of California Berkeley. I studied Political Science. I have interned first for Senator Boxer and then for President Obama in the Office of Legislative Affairs. And then after that, and last summer, I interned for Congresswoman Jackie Speier in her district office.

Studying Poly Sci and learning about disability rights

ALICE: What drew you to Poly Sci, and how much about disability rights did you learn within your major in Political Science?

SARAH: So, I was drawn to the major of Political Science when I was probably around 15 years old. I was asked to be part of the Youth Commission of San Mateo County. I was a representative on the Commission on Disability as well when I was in high school. While I was doing that, I also applied for a WYL so I could be part of the 2008 cohort. And that's where I really learned about disability history. I didn't get any of that in my Political Science classes.

I also really admired people like Hillary Clinton and Sandra Day O'Connor and also Senator Barbara Boxer. I also admire very much what Congresswoman Speier has done for her constituents even in light of her cosponsoring H.R. 620. I'm very upset about that decision. But I still admire her greatly for being such a fierce advocate in many other areas. So, there's just a lot of women that I really admired, and so that's what really drew me to the major.

Student activism around voting

ALICE: While you were at UC Berkeley, you were involved in student activism as a Vote Everywhere Ambassador. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

SARAH: When I was in high school, I had gone on a trip called Sojourn to the Past, which was a trip where I relived the Civil Rights Movement. We went to Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee. And so, I met people that were actually at the march in Selma. I met Congressman John Lewis.

ALICE: Oh, wow.

SARAH: So, this trip really informed, for me, why voting was so important. I went to the open house for the public service center. And it was there that they had told me, you know, "We have this brand new fellowship that's called the Andrew Goodman Foundation Vote Everywhere Ambassador fellowship. Please apply." And that's how I got involved. And what I did was take part every year in National Voter Registration Day. And I was also a partner with Human Rights for the Incarcerated at UC Berkeley, CALPIRG, and Common Cause. That was our cohort in our coalition. And it was this great way to really try and figure out how we're going to get UC Berkeley to one, register students, but then also turned them out on Election Day.

So, I tried to get a voting rights holiday passed while I was a student on campus. Unfortunately, that didn't go through. I eventually, with the help of two other ambassadors, was to get UC Berkeley to sign up to be part of NSOLVE. NSOLVE is the National Study Of Learning, Voting, and Engagement. It really measures the voting engagement of the students at all of the campuses.

And then last year, I tried to get UC Berkeley to be part of the All In Challenge, which is this huge coalition of universities across, and community colleges, across the nation to really compete with one another and see who can register the most voters.

[pensive piano interlude]

Barriers and challenges preventing students from voting

ALICE: What did you see as some of the major barriers that prevented students from either interest in voting or actual physical barriers or other rules that prevented students from turning out the vote?

SARAH: The biggest problem at UC Berkeley is that we don't have an on-campus polling place. A lot of students do not have cars and therefore can't always get from campus to their home or to maybe pick up their vote by mail ballot. If they wanna then vote in person, to then go to the polls and vote in person. Like as a disabled person, that wasn't feasible for me. If you're already having to be in classes and then having to deal with the midterms while the election's going on—because of course, the midterms happen during midterms, as does the presidential election—and you're told you have to be in class or you're gonna get marked down, unfortunately, voting then becomes a barrier. There are people that commute from Sacramento, Vallejo, and then make it to their polling place by 8:00 p.m. That's why I was so insistent on getting a voting holiday on campus.

ALICE: I feel like there's a lot of misinformation out there. And often a lot of states are clearly trying to prevent students on campus from voting who aren't residents of that county or state. So, is there anything you can speak to that in terms of problems with registration?

SARAH: A lot of students don't realize that when you move to a new place, you have to register to vote. And then also, out of state students who want to vote in their home states, which is perfectly fine. But the mail can be a burden, especially since you have to postmark it by the certain day. You have to calculate the weight of the envelope, which is something that is now being addressed in a bill that's already passed so that the voters won't have to pay for postage. And then it's not really even discussed what happens when students go abroad. There's just not a lot of information, and it's really difficult to really disseminate that information.

What does political participation mean to you?

ALICE: And what does political participation mean to you? Because it's clearly more than just voting. Can you describe some other examples of political participation and why you think disabled people should be more involved?

SARAH: It's making sure you serve on juries. It's making sure you're there, represented on commissions and boards in your county and state. It's you know, voting with your wallet, right? It's making sure that if you can, that you can go to a protest and be seen that way. It's having a voice online. Calling out a member of Congress or a Senator who isn't voting the way you want. It's calling your Reps every day. And I think as people with disabilities, a huge way that we can be seen in our communities is by being poll workers, and it's by actually showing up at the polls. And yes, that is difficult, right? A lot of us have to take paratransit to get there.

A lot of us you know, are struggling to get out of bed and make sure that we have the supports in place to move around. And I'm not saying it's a superior way than voting by mail, but the more we're seen out in society, the better. And unfortunately in California, the Voters Choice Act has made it a goal to get every county to have vote centers as opposed to neighborhood polling places. And for me, that's a problem because I want my community to see me.

The process of becoming an intern

ALICE: You know, you mentioned earlier that you interned at the House of Representatives, the White House, and the Senate. Especially for young people who might be listening who do

wanna look into public service and internships, how did you become a intern, and what was that experience like?

SARAH: So, I would say for young people with disabilities who want to do internships, that they should start early. I started in D.C. with a program called Cal In the Capitol, where it was a program that is just at UC Berkeley. And it's a program where all you do is go to D.C., live in the UC D.C. building, and you intern full time or part time, and you don't have to take classes. And then because I was a disabled student, I was able to use a program called Workability IV, which is a program that still exists through the Department of Rehabilitation, but it's no longer at Berkeley.

And so, my WorkAbility IV Coordinator—shout out to Esther Green—she made sure that my résumé reached its full potential. She helped me pick a writing sample that I should use to apply for this internship. I wanted to make sure that as a disabled human who's had and still has a lot of pain, that I could actually do the job, that I could handle cooking for myself and not having any family support around, that I could manage my budget, that I could learn the culture of D.C. So, I worked with Esther Green after the Cal in the Capitol application in January of 2016 to apply to be a White House intern. That took a lot of work.

Make sure to research what opportunities there are in public service at your university, whether it's a public university, whether it's a community college, a state university. Just make sure to always use your resources and ask around.

ALICE: Well, that's great advice.

[ambient music interlude]

Thoughts, concerns, and hopes and motivating people for more political participation

ALICE: With the midterms coming up right around the corner in November, 2018, what are your thoughts, your concerns, your hopes?

SARAH: So, I'm hoping to see a lot of voter turnout, and I'm hoping that people are going into the polling place or the the voting booth well-informed. Don't just vote for your member of Congress or vote out your member of Congress. Make sure that you know on the county and the city level, because those are the people that affect you on the daily basis more than your member of Congress or the president. Make sure you know who's running for State Assembly, for State Senate, for City Council, for School Board. I read a poll recently that only 28% of millennials are planning to turn out for the midterms. And that's not OK. I want people to really think about what people have given up and what people have done to ensure the right to vote.

ALICE: There are a lot of people who feel very apathetic or that the whole system is corrupt, or for various reasons why they choose not to vote. And what's your kind of response to those positions?

SARAH: Yeah. So, my response to them is how did you get here today? Did you take a bus? Did you take BART? Did you walk? If you walked on the sidewalk, were there cracks in it? If you are a wheelchair user, did you feel some bumps? If you took BART, was it was a nice ride? If you drove, are you happy with the amount of traffic? What are the environmental factors you have to deal with today for us to have this conversation? Or bigger deals, like are you happy with Costa-Hawkins? Are you happy with climate change right now? We have, I believe, 16 fires burning right now in California, you know? Like, do you believe in climate change? If so, do you

wanna use that knowledge to vote. Do you wanna see people that actually represent you look like you?

Kids with disabilities grow up. They grow up, and they vote! What are the elected officials and the candidates doing right now to make sure disabled kids have a better life and that they have all the opportunities that I had? I was told in high school that it wasn't worth for me fighting high school. That I was never gonna graduate high school. I had to fight that, and I had to graduate and get a diploma. And when I was a little kid and I was sick—I had a brain tumor—when I was going through chemotherapy and was in the hospital, fighting to live, I dreamed about being a White House intern. I dreamed about not being left behind in terms of school, in terms of my community and society. So, these disabled kids grow up. They grow up, they vote, and they are going to have a say.

ALICE: Thank you, Sarah, so much for being on my podcast today.

SARAH: Well, thank you so much for having me. This was such a great experience.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Reyma and Sarah on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeeeeee!

♪ Lord knows where I'm headed,

It's hard out here for a gimp ♪